



At a Glance: Closing the Achievement Gap 2007

Honoring South Carolina Schools and
Understanding Consistent Achievers
March 23, 2007

135 SC Elementary and Middle Schools Honored

In the Education Oversight Committee's (EOC) fifth annual study of the gap-closing schools, 135 schools (16 percent of elementary and middle schools) have been identified and will be honored based on results of the English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics portions of the 2006 Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). The identified schools have high student achievement for at least one target subgroup --- African American students, Hispanic students, or students participating in the free/reduced price lunch program.

Identified as a persistent challenge nationwide, the achievement gap is defined as the difference in achievement between the target group (the historically lower-scoring demographic group) and the statewide comparison group (the historically higher-scoring group) at various PACT performance levels (Basic or Above/Proficient or Advanced.)

Principals and staff from many of the recognized schools are invited to the EOC meeting on April 9, 2007, to be recognized by the EOC. Johnny Calder of Forestbrook Elementary in Horry County and Shaileen Riginos from Liberty Elementary in Pickens County will present information about strategies and programs in their schools that they believe are reasons for their schools' successes. This year, both schools will be recognized as gap-closers for five consecutive years.

Highlights of this Year's Gap Analysis

- In an analysis of PACT math and ELA scores:
 - The *smallest* achievement gap was observed in PACT math at the Basic and above level (19.2 percentage points) comparing the performance of white and Hispanic students.
 - The *largest* achievement gap was observed in PACT math at the Proficient and Advanced level (28.9 percentage points) comparing the performance of white and African American students.
- Gaps between white and African American students, while lower each year studied through 2004, remain consistently larger than gaps between white and Hispanic students and between pay and free- or reduced-price lunch students.
 - The analysis revealed a three-year downward trend in the achievement gap at the Basic or above level in ELA between white and African American students, which is encouraging.
- Although progress is being made, the sizes of the gaps are discouraging if South Carolina is to meet its 2010 achievement goal for all students.
- Many of the schools recognized in previous years for closing the achievement gap have maintained their accomplishment.
 - Twenty-seven schools have been recognized for five consecutive years.
- Achievement gaps observed at the Proficient or Advanced levels in ELA and math are larger than those at the Basic or above performance levels for all groups.
- An increase occurred in all observed achievement gaps in math, with the exception of the gap between white and Hispanic students at the Basic or above level, which decreased almost one percentage point from 2005.
- Thirty percent of this year's honored schools are high-poverty schools, serving a student population of at least 70 percent poverty. Sixty-seven percent of the honored schools serve a population of at least 50 percent poverty.
- Performance on the science and social studies PACT tests was analyzed in this year's report but schools were not recognized for achievement in these content areas. The gaps in these subject areas should be noted.
 - The gaps in science achievement between white and African American students are the largest of all in the demographic comparisons of all the PACT tests in 2006.
 - The gaps in social studies achievement between white and Hispanic students are the smallest of all in the demographic comparisons of all the PACT tests in 2006.

- Overall, there was a decrease in the number of schools recognized this year (138 schools identified in 2005), reflecting limited progress observed in PACT math in 2006.

A Study of Consistently Recognized Gap-Closing Schools in SC

In an effort to foster improvement efforts statewide, a study examining schools recognized four consecutive years for reducing the gap was conducted. The EOC contracted with the SC Educational Policy Center (SCEPC) to study the characteristics of these gap-closing schools.

The study, which examines the characteristics of 26 elementary schools using school report card indicators and school climate survey data gathered from students, parents, and teachers, identified the important role of a positive school climate that fosters the attainment of high student performance.

Some of the study's findings were:

- A strong association between positive school climate and student achievement is identified.
 - Teachers in gap-closing schools expressed more favorable opinions of schools, especially in the area of home-school relations. They also view teacher and staff morale as positive.
 - Parents in gap-closing schools tend to be more active in the schools as volunteers and rate the schools higher for their efforts to engage parents. They saw fewer “obstacles to active participation” and they tended to view students as “better behaved.”
 - Students in gap-closing schools were more satisfied with the social-physical environment than students in other schools, agreeing more often that students “behaved well in class” and that bathrooms at school “are kept clean.”
- Gap-closing schools serve more middle-income students, more gifted students, and fewer students more than two years older than the typical age for pupils at the grade level.
- The 26 gap-closing schools included in the study were located in only 15 of the 85 school districts.
- Three of the 26 gap-closers had poverty indexes higher than 70 percent.

Recommendations from SCEPC Study

- Given the strong association between positive school climate and student achievement, district administrators, school administrators, teachers, school improvement council members, and external review team members should review carefully school climate data as part of a comprehensive school improvement process.
- The development of a school climate report, designed expressly for school administrators and school improvement councils, should be considered.
- Follow-up studies should be conducted with data for middle and high schools to examine relationships between school climate dimensions and student achievement, attendance, and graduation rate.
- The role of district characteristics and support in improving school outcomes and achieving gap-closing status should be further explored. Survey items designed to address this dimension could be added to the current survey instrumentation.

Voices

“Schools *can* be successful in raising the achievement levels of all students to a high level regardless of the risk factors students bring to school with them. It takes involvement, commitment and a complete focus on the individual needs of students.” – *David Potter, EOC Director of Research*

“A favorable school climate provides the structure within which students, teachers, administrators, and parents function cooperatively and constructively. Relationships, mutual respect, and communication are critical to success. The good news is that schools can do something to improve these things.” – *Diane Monrad, SCEPC*

“Students learn differently and at different paces. We provide them [students] adequate time to master the skills they need by providing tutorials before, during, and after school.” – *Johnny Calder, Principal of Forestbrook Elementary*

“Expectations are high at Liberty and education is a shared responsibility that is valued. We have special children and teachers here.” – *Shaileen Riginos, Principal of Liberty Elementary*

For additional information, contact the EOC at (803) 734-6148.

A list of the honored schools, a technical report on this year’s gap analysis, and a complete copy of the report “Climate for High Achievement: A Study of Gap Closing Schools in South Carolina” can be found online at www.sceoc.org. Comments from Johnny Calder and Shaileen Riginos will be available online April 10.